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Researchers: Freedom Not First to Contaminate WV Drinking Water

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(01/20/14) CHARLESTON, W.Va. - The Freedom chemical spill drew international attention, but researchers said it is hardly unique, since coal mining and processing have damaged West Virginia's drinking water for years in ways often ignored before now. One study quoted by the Associated Press (AP) found that water supplies in coalfield counties are seven times more likely to exceed safe limits than those in non-coal counties.

Rob Goodwin, technical analyst, West Virginia C.A.R.E. (Citizen Action for Real Enforcement) campaign, said he is constantly investigating complaints from homeowners whose well or spring water has been affected. Goodwin charged that most officials are ignoring what is a huge problem.

"Hundreds and hundreds, maybe thousands, of homes are in the southern part of the state, where people had problems with the water source they had," he said, "largely due to the impacts of mining."

Goodwin recalled that one homeowner near Coal River Mountain called them because his coffee "looked funny." Tests of his well found manganese 100 times the safe limit.

Wheeling Jesuit University Biology professor Ben Stout said such heavy metals, also including lead and arsenic, are dangerous - and often invisible.

"They're odorless, colorless and tasteless, so you can be consuming them unknowingly," Stout explained. "It's not until you get elements like iron and manganese, which turn the water red or black respectively, that you know something's wrong with your water."

Stout, who has studied the impact of coal on water quality for a decade, said the grim truth is that the first indication scientists get of drinking water problems is often a spike in illness. And he noted even that sign does not work well in a rural area.

"If you're in an Atlanta neighborhood, and it's sitting right beside another neighborhood that's not a cancer cluster, then you have something to compare it to. But when you have small communities, a cancer cluster could be five people out of a hundred," Stout said.

According to Goodwin, mining made the Freedom spill worse. He said some coalfield public service districts (PSDs) - like the Van PSD in Boone County - have had to join the West Virginia American Water system.

"They got their water out of the Pond Fork of the Coal River. I wouldn't drink water out of that because of the amount of coal slurry and coal waste upstream, in the Pond Fork watershed," he warned.

The industry has argued that it operates in accord with extensive and rigorous permitting guidelines. However, federal figures cited by the AP indicate that mining has tainted hundreds of state waterways and groundwater supplies.

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